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LETTERS FROM G. W. P. CUSTIS TO GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1797-1798.

(FROM THE ORIGINALS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE
VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY.)

[The following letters are part of a large and valuable collection of papers given to this Society by General G. W. C. Lee. The letters of one of Washington's family to him must always be of interest, and this interest is heightened by the fact that the writer was the father of Mrs. Robert E. Lee. Mrs. Washington's only son, John Parke Custis, married Eleanor, daughter of Benedict Calvert, of "Mt. Airy," Prince George county, Md., and died November 5, 1781, of disease contracted during the siege of Yorktown. He left four children: Elizabeth Parke, who married Thomas Law; Martha, who married Thomas Peter; Eleanor Parke, who married, February 22, 1799, Lawrence Lewis, and George Washington Parke. The two youngest children were adopted by Washington. G. W. P. Custis was born April 30, 1781, so was only sixteen or seventeen years old when these letters were written. About the time this series of letters began young Custis had evidently been guilty of some sort of schoolboy indiscretion which only required a letter of reproof from Washington to stop. The correspondence shows the conduct of both parties to it in a most honorable and engaging light. It shows, too, that Washington, statue-like as the biographers have made him, could win the sincere love of the members of his family. Mr. Custis' love and reverence for Washington was his ruling passion throughout life. He lived at Mt. Vernon until Mrs. Washington's death in 1802 and then built Arlington, where he spent the remainder of his life. He owned a great landed estate and many slaves (whom he freed), was greatly interested in the improvement of agriculture, and dispensed a most generous hospitality at Arlington. His *Recollections of Washington*, published by

his daughter in 1860, are well known. He married in 1806, Mary Lee, daughter of William Fitzhugh, of "Chatham," Stafford county, and had an only child who survived infancy. This was Mary Anne Randolph Custis, who married Robert E. Lee.

Cassius Lee, referred to in the letters, died at Princeton July 8, 1798, in his nineteenth year.

In 1798 young Custis removed from Princeton to St. John's College, Annapolis.]

NASSAU HALL, March 25 [1797].

DEAREST SIR:

A letter from my sister this morning informed me of your safe arrival at Mt. Vernon, which has hitherto prevented me from writing. I congratulate you on a *thing* so evidently wished for by all those interested in your welfare. The *marks* of approbation and esteem manifested in the manners of the different States through which you passed must have been highly gratifying and satisfactory, and the pleasure received on reaching the destined haven must have rendered your happiness consummate.

The different studies I have passed through during the winter I am now reviewing, and the evident good effects resulting from an attention to them at first are now conspicuous; the examination will come on in a fortnight, and immediately after the vacation will commence. The money you were so kind as to transmit for the bearing of my expenses I shall receive at my departure, and keep regular accounts of all expenditures. I shall set off the next day and pass through Philadelphia without stopping, by which means I shall have about twenty days to stay at home, my anxiety to attain which will preponderate against all other considerations. The Roman History I have finished, reviewed and am perfect, translating French has become pretty familiar, and the great deal of writing attending which has probably improved my hand. I have read a great many good authors this winter and have paid particular attention to *Hume*, have obtained a tolerable idea of geography, and sir, in justice to myself and my own endeavors, I think I have spent my time in nowise to be complained.

Arithmetic, I must confess, I have not made as much progress in as could be expected, owing to a variety of circumstances, and the superficial manner in which I first imbibed the principles, but the ensuing summer shall make up the deficiency and then I hope I shall have no cause to complain of myself. If, sir, my staying in Philadelphia I could do anything you might wish, I will do it, or anything else, with pleasure. As for myself I have no desire to delay a moment.

I now conclude by wishing you health and happiness. Remember me to all the family, and believe me,

Sincerely yours,

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

Geo. Washington, Esqr.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esqr., Mount Vernon.

[Endorsed] From George Washington Custis, 25 Mar. 1797.

NASSAU HALL, 29th May [1797].

DEAREST SIR:

Words cannot express my present sensations, a heart overflowing with joy at the success of conscience over disposition is all I have to give. Dearest sir, did you but know the effect your letter has produced it would give you as consummate pleasure as my former one did pain. My very soul tortured in the sting of conscience at length called to reason to its aid and happy for me triumphed, the conflict was long doubtful till at length I obtained the victory over myself and now return like the *prodigal son* a sincere penitent. That I shall ever recompense again for the trouble I have occasioned is beyond my hope, however I will now make the grand exertion, I will now shew all is not lost, and that your grandson shall once more deserve your favour. Could you but see how happy I now am you would soon forget all that is past and let my future conduct prove the truth of my assertions. Good God, how just your letter, but alas we are poor, weak and never believe till we feel. Ah—could I but believe this would again restore your peace of mind, my happiness would be complete, my time appears now to me full short, I shall seize the present moment,

and may God grant I may be a pleasure to my friends, family, and self. I cannot say too much on this subject. I wait for your letter, which I can almost read all ready. That I have abused such goodness is shocking; that I shall ever do so again I will risk my life, and confiding, dearest sir, in your equity and hitherto kind affection, I subscribe myself with the sincerest and most heartfelt joy,

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esq., Mount Vernon.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. Wash'n Custis, 29th May, 1787.

NASSAU HALL, June 8 [1797].

DEAREST SIR:

With a heart overflowing with gratitude, love and joy, I return you thanks for your favour of the 4th ultimo, and could my words do justice to my feelings, I would paint their lightest tints, but words communicate ideas not *sensations*! Your letter, fraught with what reason, prudence and affection only can dictate, is engraven on my mind and takes root in a *soil* which I shall cultivate and which I hope in God may become fruitful; and, dearest sir, while I look up to that Providence which has preserved me in the late contest with the passions, and which has enabled me to do that which will redound to my honour, permit me to make this humble confession, sanctioned by reason and mature deliberation, viz: That if in any way or by any means I depart from your direction or guardianship, let me suffer as I and such an imprudent act deserve. Unfortunately man never will believe until convinced (perhaps too late) by his own situation. That your letter and the directions therein contained were merely from the purest motives I cannot admit a doubt from one unto whom I have looked up for support on earth and from whom I have experienced unbounded generosity. These things I am aware of, and let my endeavours to recompense be as great as yours to serve is all I can hope for, and what my conscience tells me I shall attain.

During my recess from college I was by no means idle, having with Doctor Smith completely studied the use of the globes,

and got a pretty tolerable insight into geography. The course he means to pursue this summer privately I do not know except Priestley's elements of natural history, which I shall begin immediately with Smith's Constitutions.

I have at length obtained a room to myself and shall take a *room mate*, a Mr. Cassius Lee, son of Richard Henry, a young man lately arrived from the eastward, where he has been pursuing his studies privately; he is of an amiable disposition and very well informed. I shall have an opportunity of giving you better information concerning him when he has resided with me some time, as yet he is perfectly agreeable and very engaging. The Roman history my class are now studying, and as I am very well acquainted with it from having previously studied it with the Doctor, of course have some time for reading, which I shall employ accordingly.

Accept, sir, my sincere thanks for not having revealed my situation to my family; no doubt it was most prudent. I had written to Mr. Law and given him some idea of the thing, supposing he might have gotten wind of it, and will in future endeavour to obliterate it from the memory of every one.

The things with which you commissioned me to obtain I accordingly provided, and suppose you have the account now for adjustment. They are perfectly suitable and reasonable I hope. I am now in perfect health, though the summer is more disagreeable for everything. I shall take particular care in eating fruit and drinking water, as I have seen so many fatal instances of intemperance in both. June passes now very pleasantly, as the Country affords many inducements to agreeable recreation.

I now conclude with expressing what I all ways have held nearest my heart, a desire of your esteem, and be assured naught shall be wanting on my part for the obtaining of the same, and may

That great Parent of the Universe prolong your days is the sincere prayer of your ever affectionate

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

George Washington, Esqr.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. W. P. Custis, 8th June, 1797.

DEAREST SIR:

NASSAU HALL, July 1st [1797].

Since my last, nothing material has occurred, the weather is exceedingly sultry, the thermometer being generally at 98 degrees, which makes study and confinement very disagreeable. We sometimes go to a shade, but the attractions to take up your attention almost exceed the coolness of the thing itself; my studies with the class are by no means difficult, chiefly consisting in ancient history which I studied with the Doctor last winter, of course I have much time to read, which I shall accordingly do.—I am at present studying Priestley's Lectures on History with the Doctor and read Smollett and Hume by myself.

We shall begin Geography in about the middle of this month and devote the remainder of the session to that alone. I have studied the use of the globes and a good deal of maps with the Doctor during my recess from College in the first of the session.

I have written to Mr. Zachariah Lewis, my old private tutor, to solicit his correspondence, and have received a letter from him expressing his approbation of the measure.

The 4th July will be celebrated with all possible magnificence, the College will be illuminated, and cannon fired, a ball will be held at the tavern in the evening, which I shall not attend, as I do not think it consistent with propriety.

Mr. Cassius Lee, the gentleman I informed you I had taken in as a room mate, is a remarkable moral, modest and clever young man, and I have no doubt that we shall live happy, he is a son of Richard Henry Lee and brother to Ludwell. My room is fitted up very neat and comfortable, altho when the Senior Class leave College I may almost have the choice.

Mr. Burwell called on me on his way to Boston and informed me you were not very well. I sincerely hope it proceeded merely from cold or fatigue and will not produce disagreeable consequences.

I now conclude with wishing you health and all the happiness this world can afford, and be assured I remain

Sincerely your most affectionate

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

P. S.—Mr. Lee's *respectfull* compliments wait on you, sir; he is happy to inform you he left your nephew well at Andover, Massachusetts.

George Washington, Esqr.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esqr., Mount Vernon.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. Washington Custis, July, 1797.

NASSAU HALL, July 14 [1797].

MOST HONOURED SIR:

I have just received your kind favour of the 10th ultimo, together with the enclosed, for all of which accept my thanks. I congratulate you on the enjoyment of your health and prospects of future felicity, which that you may attain and experience is my fervent prayer.

The gentlemen whose correspondence I have submitted to your inspection, and if you should think necessary would immediately discard; are Messrs. Lewis, Law, Lear and Doctor Stuart. With respect to the apprehensions entertained concerning Lewis' advice on particular *subjects* which materially effect myself I own they are perfectly just and proper and am happy you have suggested them as they will put me on my guard against attempts of that kind from any of them, our letters are generally on topics which occasion remarks on both sides, and are improving to me alone, as they tend to correct style and give fluency to expression, and likewise peculiarity, confined to rule. I am studying the principles and uses of history in general, with the Doctor in a course of lectures by Priestley and shall be able to apply them to any course so as to make it easy to be understood and entertaining. I have considerable leisure for reading, as the Class are studying Roman Antiquities, which I have previously studied with the Doctor, and, of course, only require a revisal. I apply my spare time wholly to reading, as I am confident it furnishes a fund of information serviceable in Society. Smollett and Hume I have nearly finished, altho Hume I have read last winter. I hope to evince by my knowledge of these authors that I have not merely read them for amusement.

The fourth July was celebrated here with all possible magnificence. We fire 3 times 16 rounds from a six-pounder and had public exhibitions of speaking, at night, the whole college was beautifully illuminated and had a very pleasing effect, the ball was instituted by the students and principally attended by them. My ideas of impropriety proceeded from a distaste of such things during a recess from them, as I was confident all relish for study would be lost, after such enjoyment, for, there is a difference in the minds being entirely taken off an object, to which it can return with increased vigour and a momentary relapse without anything more than whetting the appetite when it cannot be satiated. Our thermometer exposed to the rays of the sun rose to 110 degrees, and has been at 98 degrees almost ever since. We mostly go with slight clothing and are permitted to wear morning gowns. I am at present not in want of anything and perfectly well. With my kind remembrance to my friends and family I conclude with wishing you health, peace and happiness, the only blessings this world can bestow and *Man* enjoy, and subscribe myself with

Sincere affection and duty your

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

George Washington, Esqr.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esqr., Mount Vernon.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. Washington Custis, 14th July, 1797.

NASSAU HALL, July 30th [1797].

DEAREST SIR:

It is with pleasure I acknowledge the receipt of your obliging favour of the 23d instant, and must congratulate you on the enjoyment of your health, the preservation of which should always be a principal aim in all men, and I have no doubt that as long as you are able to take your accustomed exercise that you will enjoy perfect health.

Mr. Z. Lewis has kept up the correspondence I mentioned in my last pretty constant, and his letters have generally contained commonplace remarks on different subjects, his plans,

were he to suggest any, would have little weight with me and would not tend to counteract those of Doctor Smith, I assure you, as to the other gentlemen, I am well convinced they would merely suggest and not pretend to influence me in any pursuit previously pointed out.

With respect to the study of Geography I had forgotten that you were unacquainted with the studies of the Class or I should have mentioned it particularly.

We are at present engaged in Geography and English Grammar, both of which we shall nearly conclude this session, the Senior Class will leave College in about a fortnight, when we shall become Junior or second class in College, in station, though not in studies, as we do not begin the Mathematics until next session, the time I must confess appears to pass away almost imperceptibly as this session wants but eight weeks of being out.

It was with heartfelt satisfaction I read that Buonaparte had sued for the liberation of the *Marquis*. I sincerely hope poor Mr. Lafayette may have had some authentic accounts concerning the same which will no doubt afford him great relief in his present state of suspense.

The weather here has become much more moderate when I last gave a statement of it I did not mention that the thermometer was considerably exposed to the rays of the sun, having nothing more than a thin silk over it. I have no news to tell except that *Greenleaf* is in jail and likely to remain there on suits of his creditors. Messrs. Morris and Nicholson are much embarrassed, the latter is reported to have gone to Europe, the authenticity of the said I do not much doubt as I had it of a gentlemen from Philadelphia.

Present my love to the family and be assured, dearest sir, that bound by ties indissoluble in themselves and sacred to me I remain

Yours dutiful and affectionate,

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

Please to forward the enclosed by any opportunity that may occur.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esq., Mount Vernon.

[Endorsed] Mr. G. Washington Custis, 30th July, 1797.

ANNAPOLIS, March 12 [1798].

DEAREST SIR:

I arrived here in due season after a very agreeable journey, I found all my relations well and Annapolis a very pleasant place. I visited the principle inhabitants while the Doctor was here and found them all very kind. Mr. McDowell is a very good and agreeable man, he has examined me and I am now pursuing Natural Philosophy and hope to distinguish myself in that branch as well as others. Arithmetic I have likewise reviewed and shall enter immediately on the French language with the Professor here. I was so fortunate as to get in with a Mrs. Brice, a remarkable clever woman, with whom I live very well and contented. There are several very clever young men boarding in this house, with whom I associate and who are very friendly and agreeable. The mail is going and I have only to add that I have constantly in mind your virtuous precepts, which I hope to benefit by, and

Am most sincerely and affectionately your dutifull

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

Geo. Washington, Esq.

[Endorsed] Copied March 12, 1798.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esq., Mount Vernon, Virginia.

ANNAPOLIS, April 2d, 1798.

DEAREST SIR:

Your letter arrived by the ordinary course of the mail which goes by Baltimore and gave me sincere pleasure in hearing that you were in good health and likewise the family.

I was somewhat unwell for some time after coming here owing to the water, but that is entirely removed and I am very well again.

I am going on the college with the class and likewise the French master who is I believe very competent to the task. We likewise write dissertations on various subjects every week, which are both amusing and instructive and which create emulation laudable in everything.

I am very happily situated, perhaps better than many, and could a repetition of those sentiments which I have always avowed express my gratitude and obligations to you, freely should they be exercised, but it is sufficient that they are indelibly grounded on my mind, and can never be erased while the principles on which they are founded exist.

Those principles animate. It is them which elevate the soul and prompt us to good works. I conceive that misfortunes are intended as an awful example for us to profit by and are proportionate to the degree of prevalence which the passions have over us. What, then, could have been a greater misfortune to me than your displeasure. What a greater happiness than your confidence?

I find that young Mr. Carroll has been at Mount Vernon and report says addressing my sister, it may be well to subjoin an opinion which I believe is general in this place, viz: that he is a young man of the strictest probity and morals, discreet without closeness, temperate without excess and modest without vanity, possessed of those amiable qualities of benevolence and friendship which are so commendable in any one, and with as few vices as the age will admit of, this may be excused as I am acting on hypothesis and supposition. In short, I think it a desirable thing and wish that it may take place with all my heart.

I have received every kindness from the citizens of Annapolis and could anything heighten my opinion of you and your character it would be their expressions of esteem and regard.

Adieu, dearest sir, and believe me,

Sincerely and affectionately yours,

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

Geo Washington, Esq.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. Washington Custis, 2nd April, 1798.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esqr., Mount Vernon, near Alexandria, Virginia.

ANNAPOLIS, May 5th, 1798.

DEAREST SIR:

Colonel Fitzgerald arrived here about an hour ago and has politely offered to convey a letter to you. Nothing material has occurred since my last letter, only that we now attend College at six in the morning, which is by no means disagreeable, and conduces to health.

With respect to what I mentioned of Mr. Carroll in my last I had no other foundation but report, which has been since contradicted. All the families in this town in which I visit express the highest esteem and veneration for your character, which conduces in great measure to the satisfaction I feel in their company.

All is well at present, I have found no inconvenience lately from the water which affected me at first. I attend College regularly and am determined that nothing shall alienate my attention.

Adieu, dearest sir, may Heaven proportion her reward to your merit, and the sincere and ardent prayer of

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

P. S.—I would thank you to inform to whom I am to apply for money in case I want.—G. C.

[Addressed] Geo. Washington, Esq.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. Washington Custis, May 5th, 1798.

ANNAPOLIS, May 26, 1798.

DEAREST SIR:

Your last letter arrived by the ordinary course of the mail and conveyed the pleasing tidings of your health, a theme always acceptable to my grateful heart.

With respect to my expenses I did not mean to insinuate that I was entirely in want, but thought that you had lodged money in some one's hands to whom I was to apply. I have opened accounts with a shoemaker, tailor and other persons of whom I might want occasional articles which shall be all transmitted when offered. I took a couple of pieces of Nankin for summer breeches and a gingham coat which together with a hat are the necessary articles I wanted. My hat might have lasted much longer had it not been a most worthless one and broke, tho not from ill usage. I have been very careful of my clothes and frequently revise them myself.

I enter on a subject which I will endeavour to make plain. Far from being addicted to frequent taverns I am not fond of such sociability and assure you I have not spent a farthing in that way. 'Tis true that I am fond, when among friends at my own time, to enter into a little superfluities, such as toddy, etc., but farther I sacredly deny any dissipation.

I visit of an evening when invited, among some families, but never drive out except on a Sunday. I have received that attention from the inhabitants of this town which claims my sincere regard, and I shall endeavour by my conduct to merit their esteem. General Stone's politeness to me has been particular and in short have contributed to my pleasure and satisfaction.

Nothing material has occurred since my last, I attend French constantly, with a very good linguist and hope to acquire the proper pronunciation. Adieu, dearest sir, and believe me, love,

Dutifully and intrinsically yours,

GEO. W. P. CUSTIS.

Geo. Washington, Esqr.

[Addressed] George Washington, Esqr., Mount Vernon, near Alexandria, Virginia.

[Endorsed] From Mr. Geo. Wash'n Custis, 20th May, 1798.

ANNAPOLIS, June 11, 1798.

[First of line gone] transmitted my last letter to you by the way of a gentleman who was going to Baltimore that it might

arrive a little sooner and quiet your mind on the subject which you mentioned in yours preceding and is on the subject of expense, if however it did not arrive I will in my next if you please transmit the same detail.

The Class which I joined have at length finished their course of Collegiate studies and I have read with them Browning's Natural Philosophy twice, Bley's Moral Ethics and Watts' Logic together with Geography and am now reading Euclid as directed by Papa.

I have lately heard from an intimate friend and confidant of young Mr. Carroll's (tho' without the least enquiry or hint on my part) that he meant to address my sister shortly; this I only communicate as a piece of information perhaps worth knowing.

Nothing has transpired since my last. I conclude therefore with wishing you all health, happiness and prosperity and am sincerely and affectionately yours,

GEORGE W. P. CUSTIS.

[No address. No endorsement.]

ANNAPOLIS, July 12, 1798.

DEAREST SIR:

My not receiving any favour from you in answer to my last and having received one from Doctor Stuart subsequent to that in which he mentions but little respecting the affair (which you expressed a desire of becoming acquainted with) has given me hopes to believe that my confession of both the circumstance of the case and my error has obliterated from your mind all unfavourable impressions.

Confiding in this assurance I again submit myself to your confidence and assure you that tho' by imprudence urged I was by duty governed. That duty which I shall hold sacred in all my various walks of life and let the goodness of my heart but cover the imprudence of my actions and I am contented.

My peace of mind, my consciousness of rectitude will all ways be to me a sufficient plea for my actions and be assured, dearest sir, nothing can contribute more to both than your favour.

I have nearly finished the six books of Euclid and expect that College will adjourn in a fortnight. I can collect and forward all accounts as soon as you shall think fit to call for the same and I hope that their reasonableness will be acceptable to you.

I need not congratulate you on an appointment which was allways designed by the Creator for one so fully capable of fulfilling it. Let an admiring world again behold a Cincinnati springing up from rural retirement to the conquest of nations and the future historian in erasing so great a name insert that of the *Father of His Country*.

Remember me to all and believe me sincerely,

Dutifully and affectionately,

G. W. P. CUSTIS.

Gen'l Geo. Washington.

[Addressed] Gen'l George Washington, Mt. Vernon.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. W. P. Custis, 12th July 1798.

ANNAPOLIS, July 21, 1798.

DEAREST SIR:

By the returning mail I heartily acknowledge your last favour and am sincerely happy in having given you full satisfaction in an affair so interest and mutually effecting to both my friends and myself.

I this day finish the six books of Euclid and with that the course marked out for me while in Annapolis. College breaks up Monday next, the 30th, and I shall allways be ready when you may send for me. I shall enclose my accounts by next post so as to be ready to leave this as soon as convenient. I would thank you to inform me whether I leave it entirely or not, so that I may pack up accordingly. With sincere affection to all friends I bid you

Sincerely adieu,

GEO. W. P. CUSTIS.

[Endorsed] From Mr. Geo. W. Custis, 21st July, 1798.

ANNAPOLIS, July 23 [1798].

DEAREST SIR:

Since my last I have collected all my accounts which I transmit for your perusal, the only article I apologize for is an umbrella which I was unavoidably obliged to procure as I lost one belonging to a gentleman.

College breaks up on Saturday and I shall be ready at any time that you may send. I will look over everything belonging to me and have them adjusted.

I am very well and at variance with no one so that I shall leave this place just as I first entered it. Believe me, dearest sir,

Sincerely and affectionately yours,

GEO. W. P. CUSTIS.

[Endorsed] From Mr. G. Wash'n Custis, 23d July, 1798.